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A ROMAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE WEST OF THE IRON GATES OF TRANSYLVANIA REDISCOVERED USING LIDAR TECHNOLOGY AND NEW ARCHIVE DOCUMENTS

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Abstract: This study introduces a new aspect in the discussions regarding military campaigns conducted over time in the western region of the Transylvania's Iron Gates. It pertains to a possible fortification discovered near Marga, Caraș-Severin County, South of the Bistra River, situated approximately 260 meters south-southwest of the DN68 and DJ684A intersection. The identification was made through *LiDAR* scans, and it presents similarities to other legionary camps in the surrounding area. Its dimensions are typical for a legionary camp; about 23.8 hectares. The structure and typological analogies place this fortification among the legionary marching camps. Could this site at Marga be the last camp to the West of the Iron Gates of Transylvania – Tapae corridor?

Keywords: *Roman period, Roman army, LiDAR, Roman fortifications, Tapae*.

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INTRODUCTION

This study begins with the identification of possible temporary Roman camps at Marga, located between Zăvoi[1] and Colonia Dacica Sarmizegetusa (Fig. 1–4). The fortifications at Marga were observed using a *LiDAR*[2] model, which revealed a series of rectangular structures either attached or overlapping with each other. These fortifications seem to result from the temporary sheltering of legionary detachments stationed there for short periods. The location of these discoveries is on the second terrace of the Bistra

[1] TUDOR 1968, 43–44; RĂUȚ/BOZU/PETROVSZKY 1977, 146–147.

[2] Information provided by Alexandru Berzovan, file w001001.adf belonging to the National Agency for Cadastre and Real Estate Advertising and the LAKI II project (Land Administration Knowledge Improvement) – ©ANCPI. In August 2023, A. Berzovan along with O. Rogozea conducted an initial field reconnaissance in the area. Although the field survey was greatly hindered by abundant vegetation, it that the anomalies visible on *LiDAR* did not fall into the category of very recent interventions (furrows, property boundaries, etc.). The second reconnaissance was carried out in February 2024, with the aim of conducting a new LiDAR scan using a Zenmuse L2 sensor at a resolution of 0.04 m/pixel. This is also the documentary support on which the illustration of this paper is based on. During the third field reconnaissance, carried out in June 2024 by Ovidiu Țentea, Vlad Călina, Miruna Libiță-Partică and Ioan Muntean. Some previous data were confirmed and the working hypotheses formulated following the integration of data from the two *LiDAR* scans, historical maps, and information from previous field recognitions were verified.

Valley, Marga commune, Caraș-Severin County, at 260 meters south-southwest of the intersection of DN68 with DJ684A. About 1.5 km to the East lies the Nermeș/Marga stream, a tributary of the Bistra River. It is a flat area, without any obstacles, theoretically favourable for the deployment and concentration of military units, and currently used as pasture.

Throughout the centuries, several military battles have been documented in the Bistra corridor and the area of the Iron Gates of Transylvania, necessitating careful interpretation of field data[3].

The Bistra corridor, followed by the Iron Gate of Transylvania – the passage to Țara Hațegului – stretches for about 40 km, roughly an extended day's march for infantry. Modern human habitation and associated infrastructure nearly completely overlap this area.[4] Naturally, every state that historically controlled the area sought to fortify the passage, given its exceptional strategic value. In terms of archaeology, pinpointing the exact dates of the fortifications within the Iron Gate of Transylvania is quite challenging, and only a select few can be linked to the battles of Tapae during the Dacian campaigns. It has been posited and argued that the Dacians blocked access to the Iron Gate of Transylvania.[5]

The series of linear earth fortifications, featuring successive ramparts and ditches that blocked the passage through the Iron Gate of Transylvania, were identified and mapped by forestry engineer Hristache Tatu, who naturally raised the question: who constructed them? The general plan shows that in the south, the linear fortifications were closed by a bastion fort with five corners, a type of fortification specific to the 17th–18th centuries[6]. The remaining fortifications seem to resemble the Dacian defensive system at Cioclovina, which appears to have been constructed to prevent the Romans from entering the Orăștie Mountains area from the Jiu Valley. In the 1980s, Ioan Glodariu, supported logistically by the Romanian army regiment from Caransebeș, carried out archaeological surveys in the area of the linear fortifications at the Iron Gate; the results were not published, likely due to the researcher documenting traces of a World War II machine gun nest, bullet remnants, and other shrapnel within the defensive system. According to the excavation leader, Dacian pottery was discovered alongside medieval pottery from the 14th–16th centuries[7] (information provided on the site by Ioan Glodariu together with Adriana Rusu-Pescariu on the occasion of the trip to the Iron Gate of Transylvania for the participants in the colloquium dedicated to the Daco-Roman wars, that took place in Geoagiu-Băi at the beginning of November 1996.

The analysis of the cartographic sources at our disposal helps to establish some directions for interpreting the sequence of fortification and re-fortification of the Transylvania's Iron Gates[8].

The first map of Transylvania, created for the Habsburg army by Italian specialists Morando Visconti and Luigi Ferdinando Marsigli, was printed in Sibiu in 1699. In their effort to defend a new possession from Turkish raids, they focused particular attention on the passes.[9] On a map of Transylvania made by Giovanni Morando Visconti in 1699[10], there is information about Roman monuments and roads in the region.[11] The map highlights Roman sites such as Micia, Zăvoi, Trajan's Bridge, Câmpulung- Jidova or Stolniceni – *Buridava*.[12] One of the sketches made under the supervision of L.F. Marsigli between 1700–1701, mapped the Iron Gate of Transylvania pass located 14 km from the fortification at Marga. At that time, the imperial cadastral team observed a north-south oriented linear fortification (Fig. 4)[13], indicating a date prior to that period as it had no assigned name. Another field sketch by topographers under Marsigli and Visconti's supervision shows that in the *Porta Ferrea* area, the pass fortification consisted of a single line of rampart and ditch, but with a serpentine aspect.[14] It is highly probable that Dacian traces should be sought here. Additionally, these maps show that the Roman fortification at Zăvoi was completely preserved, and Marsigli, along with his team of topographic technicians, appears to have used it for overnight stays.[15]

DESCRIPTION OF THE FORTIFICATION AT MARGA

As mentioned, this fortification was identified based on a LiDAR model (note 2). To detail the information from the model, a new *LiDAR*[16] scan was conducted (Fig. 5–7).

The fortification at Marga was discovered on a broad terrace, ranging between 375–390 meters in elevation (fig. 6). It features a rectangular shape with rounded corners, covering a maximum area of approximately 23.8 hectares (Fig. 8–11)[17]. Its orientation is northwest-southeast.

The ramparts are especially prominent across roughly two-thirds of the area, particularly in the northern, western, central, and southwestern parts. In the eastern and south-eastern parts, they are mostly flattened or covered by DJ684A, making them difficult to identify. The ditches are

[3] IOSIPESCU 2013; MĂNDESCU 2019, 488.
[4] TIMOC 2006, 343–344.
[5] FERENCZI 1977, 156–157.
[6] TATU 1983, 166–167.
[7] TIMOC 1997, 93.
[8] See also MĂNDESCU 2019, 493.
[9] TIMOC 2022, 171–172; ȚENTEA/MATEI-POPESCU/CĂLINA 2022.
[10] *Mappa della, Transilvania, e Provintie contique nella quale si vedano li Confini dell'Ongaria e li Campam(en)ti fatti dall'Armate Cesaree in queste ultime guerre,* Visconti 1699, B IX a 487/15, https://maps.hungaricana.hu/en/HTITerkeptar/367/ – Accessed at 30.03.2024.
[11] The issue of identifying *Pons Augusti*, based on distances from the TP, is discussed in the bibliography (BORZA 1943, 71 – 72, 108; DAICOVICIU 1943, 308; TUDOR 1968, 43–44; MACREA 1969, 152, 157, 163, 303; PISO 1976, 259–265; FODOREAN 2006, 241, MATYAS 2023, 713–724). We will not dwell here on the term "pons" as a form of construction or crossing point over water *c.f.* MACREA 1969, 157; ȚENTEA/MATEI-POPESCU/CĂLINA 2022, 237–238, 252–254.
[12] MĂNDESCU 2014, 77–84; MĂNDESCU/SÎRBU 2022, 41–56; ȚENTEA *et alii* 2022, 46.
[13] Further discussion on the chronology of these fortifications *c.f.,* TATU 1983, 165–169; BOZU 2000, 154, 158; GLODARIU 2004, 538; PEȚAN/HEGYI 2023, 5–7, FIG. 8.
[14] *Mappa della Transilvania, la quale dimostra solamente, la sua situuazione de confini, con le distanze delle sue estremità, e luoghi principali, con la spiegazione de quartieri, oue sono li Regimenti Ces(a)ri, per impedir quanto permettono detti Reg(imen)ti l'incursioni de Ribelli, in cosi grande distanze, e uasti Confini,* VISCONTI 1707–1708, TK 1116; https://maps.hungaricana.hu/en/OSZK-Terkeptar/1112/ – Accessed at 30.03.2024.
[15] STOYE 1994, 188.
[16] Scan by Dan Costea.
[17] Considering the south-eastern area with a probability of completion.

less noticeable than the ramparts. Three distinct construction phases were identified.

The northern side is still visible for a distance of approximately 170 meters. On the northern side, there is a gate-like interruption located about 90 meters from the northwest corner (Fig. 5–9). On the western side, two gate-like interruptions can be seen [18] (Fig. 5–9). Two of these have a linear barrier on the outside, indicating a *titulus* type entrance. Each measure 11 meters in length and approximately 3.3–3.5 meters in width (*LiDAR* measurements).

The traces of these sides are visible on the ground as three ramparts, each doubled on the outside (to the southwest) by a ditch. This suggests that there are three successive fortifications situated in the same place.

Information about temporary Roman camps was quite sparse until recently, but it has become a current topic as discoveries have significantly increased over the past few years. Research has demonstrated the complexity of these structures, requiring detailed analysis to formulate relevant conclusions from which credible scenarios regarding Roman soldiers' activities in motion can be developed. The most interesting discussions concern their terminology and operational function. The classification of temporary camps, initially based on their size and the number of stationed soldiers, has evolved into a somewhat classic categorisation that includes four functional types: marching camps (or "campaign"), training camps, siege camps, and construction camps (or work camps).[19]

The first fortification (the largest) would have measured approximately 605 × 400 meters, with the long sides oriented east and west. The western side can be traced for about 520 meters, merging at the southwest with another enclosure. Although it appears as an extension similar to Comărnicel I[20], we believe the two successive corners visible on this side result from consecutive adjustments of the fortifications, reducing their space to the north. Otherwise, we cannot currently explain the distinct appearance of these corners.

We considered the large quadrilateral enclosure as the first phase (Fig. 8–9, 10.a), and the second phase is the enclosure measuring approximately 520 × 400 meters (Fig. 8–9, 10.b). Approximately 215 meters southeast of the northern side, a rampart with a ditch can be observed, extending about 385 meters. Its orientation is NE-SW. In the southwest, it merges with the inner rampart of the first and second phases, ending at a possible access gate located to the northwest. With small interruptions caused by agricultural work, it continues towards the northeast, intersected perpendicularly by DJ684A, which disrupts its path. It reappears for a length of about 22 meters, and after a rounded turn, it can be observed for about 50 meters to the northwest. From here, we could partially trace the rampart for 110 meters to the northern corner of this compartment. In the delineation of this compartment, which would correspond to the third phase (Fig. 8–9, 10.c), two earthen ramparts can be observed. The most visible and well-preserved one has a width of approximately 12–15 meters, being overlapped by DJ684A, where it is most visible on the plan. These ramparts are likely of recent date, distinct from the other ramparts present as part of the three phases of the fortification (Fig. 9).

To clarify these details, non-invasive investigations need to be continued for a better understanding of its layout and the succession of phases.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

The attestation of at least two battles at *Tapae* (one during the campaign of Emperor Domitianus, led by the consular L. Tettius Iulianus[21] and another during the first Dacian campaign of Trajan – a camp of the Dacian army is also mentioned with that occasion there[22]) implies to a certain extent the idea that in the Iron Gate of Transylvania there were several Roman fortifications or strategic camping sites for the army in expedition that were reused and refortified, which is why they show archaeologically several phases of use / reuse.

The fortifications at Marga probably represent the last campsite of the Roman legions involved in the Dacian campaigns before entering the Carpathian arc through the Iron Gate of Transylvania. Should future investigations confirm this, Marga will be added to the records of camps at Berzovia, Zăvoi or Schela Cladovei, enriching the discussion on the operations conducted during the Dacian campaigns at Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa and the establishment of the first Roman city in Dacia.

The considerable size and layout of the potential fortifications at Marga (1 and 2) are characteristic of legionary camps found in southwestern Dacia (Fig. 11–12).

The dimensions and proportions of Marga 2 resemble those of the camps at Berzovia and Zăvoi. Despite comparing a summer camp, *castra aestiva,* with a stone enclosure that has different side proportions, it is worth noting that the area of Marga 1 is similar to that of the first phase at Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, among other details.

[18] The first interruption is approximately 150 meters and the second interruption is about 410 meters from the northwest corner.

[19] RICHMOND 1955, 300–303; LEPPER/FRERE 1988, 260–261; JONES 2017, 522–523; (A brief analysis ȚENTEA *et alii* 2021; ȚENTEA/MATEI-POPESCU 2023).

[20] FERENCZI 1982–1983,186; STEFAN 2005, 298–307, FIG. 145–150, 154–155; MICLE/HEGYI/FLOCA 2016, 735–737, FIG. 2; 16–21; 34–38; OLTEAN/HANSON 2017, 434, FIG. 4; MARCU/SZABÓ 2020, 79, FIG. 17.4, 9; OLTEAN/FONTE 2022, 131–148.

[21] Cassius Dio 67, 10, 1–3 (Xiphilinus); STROBEL 1989, 74–77; PETOLESCU 2014, 110–112.

[22] Cassius Dio 68, 8, 1–2 (Xiphilinus); STROBEL 1984, 170–177; STROBEL 2010, 246; PETOLESCU 2014, 145–146; STROBEL 2022, 346.

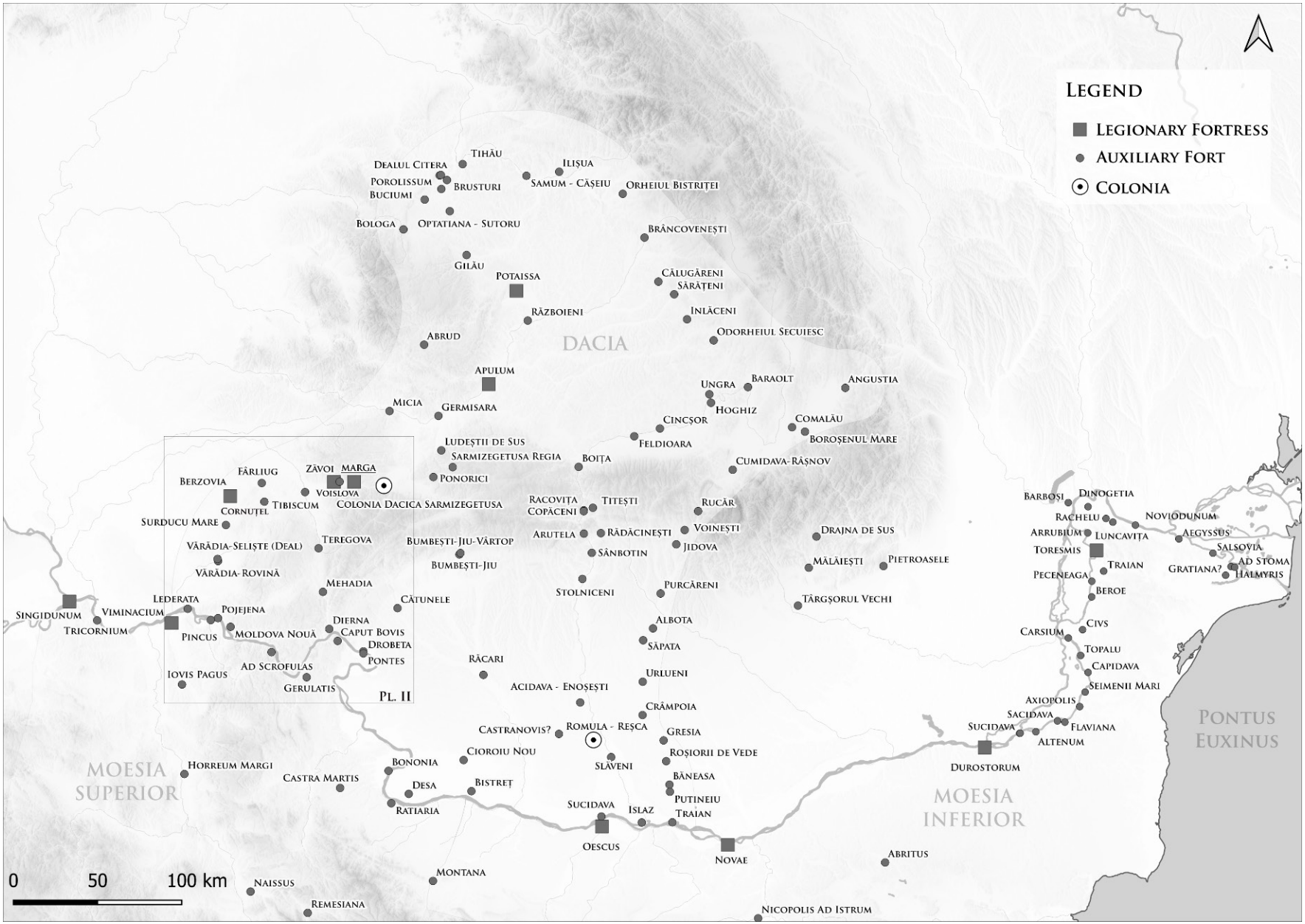


Fig. 1. Map of the provinces of Dacia, Moesia Superior and Moesia Inferior (©Vlad Călina).

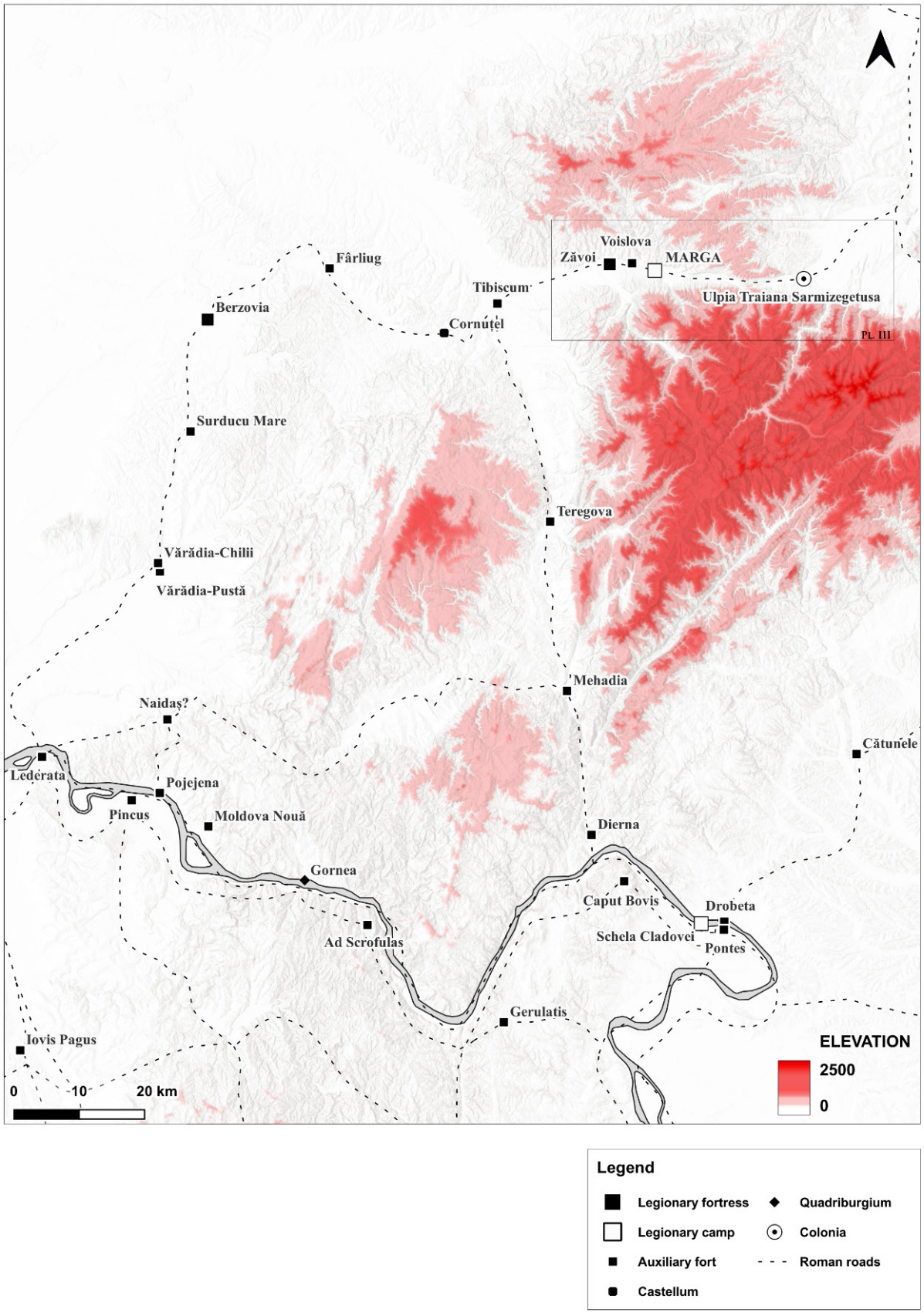


Fig. 2. Roman fortifications on the south-west limes of Dacia province (©Vlad Călina).

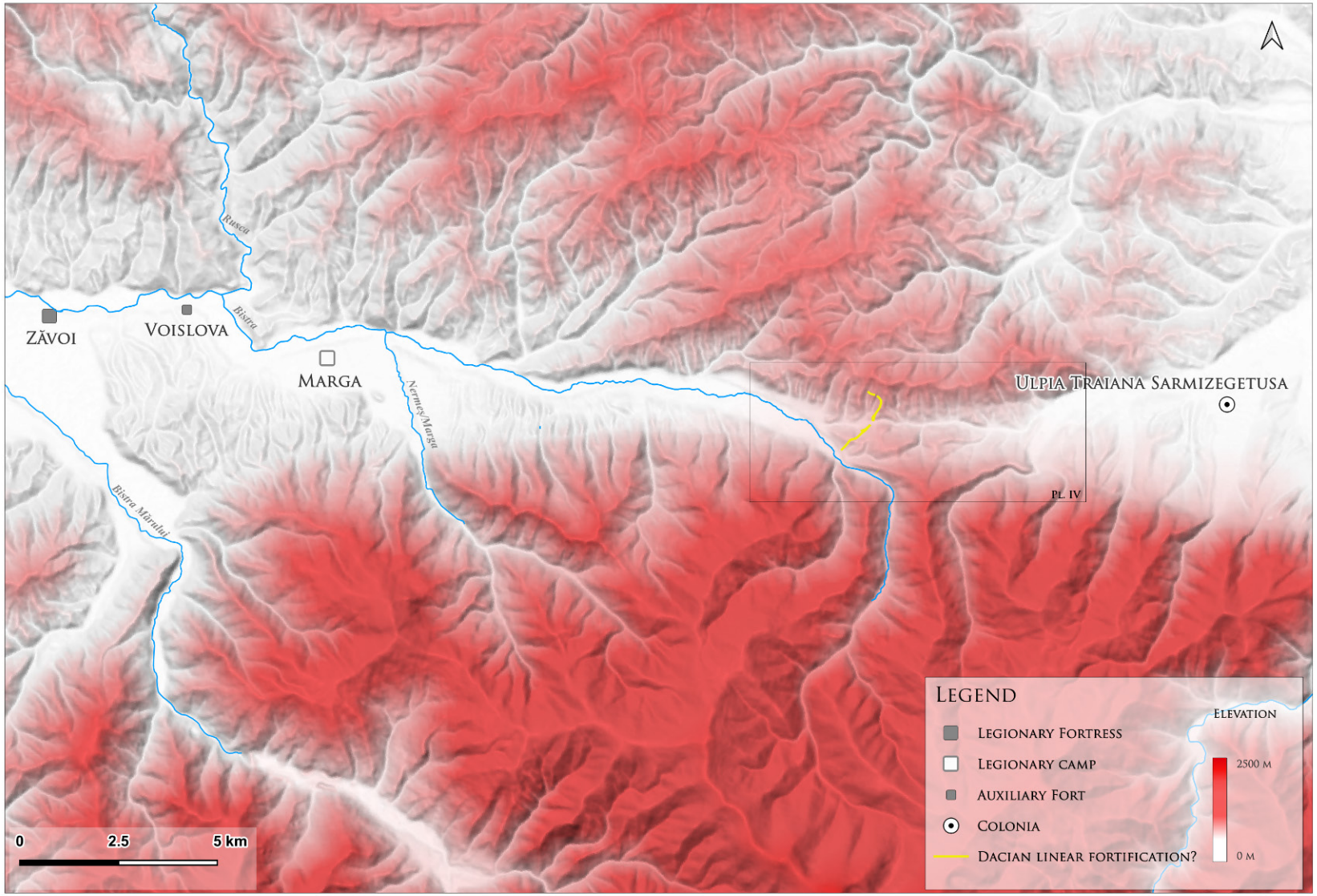
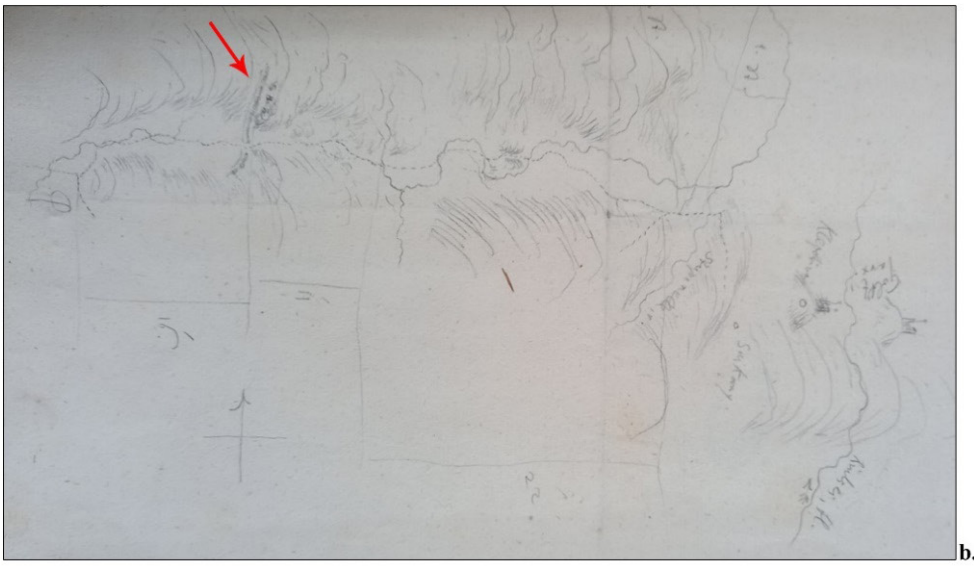


Fig. 3. Roman fortifications on the Iron Gates of Transylvania (©Authors).

a.



b.

Fig. 4. a. General plan of the Iron Gates of Transylvania drawn in ink (Bologna, Marsigli fond, from the "Diaria Itinere Limitaneo Trans-Danubialia", 373); b. Pencil sketch of the fortification (Bologna, Marsigli fond, from the "Diaria Itinere Limitaneo Trans-Danubialia", 369).

Fig. 5. Marga. LiDAR – hillshade (©Authors).

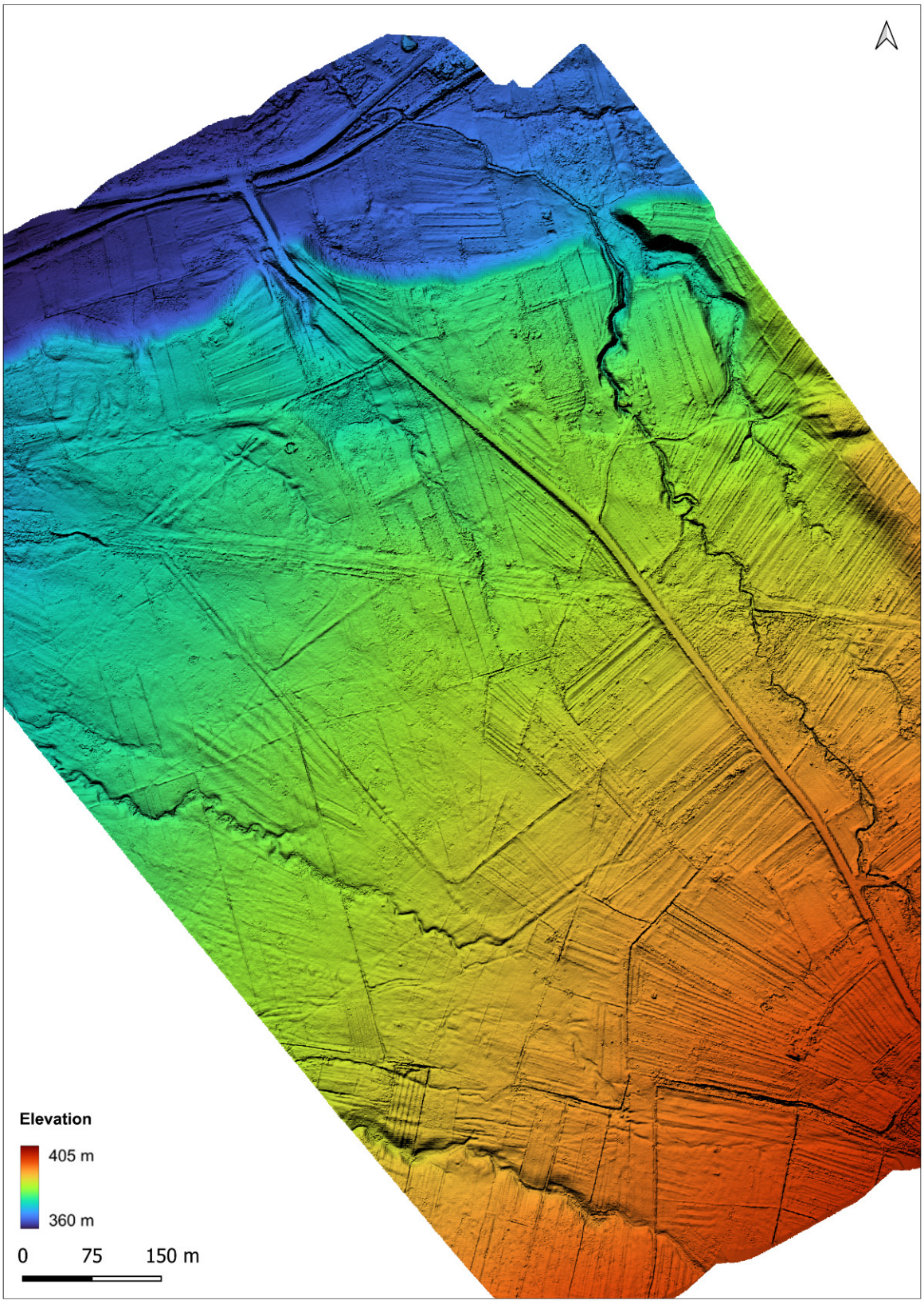


Fig. 6. Marga. Digital terrain model. LiDAR (©Authors).

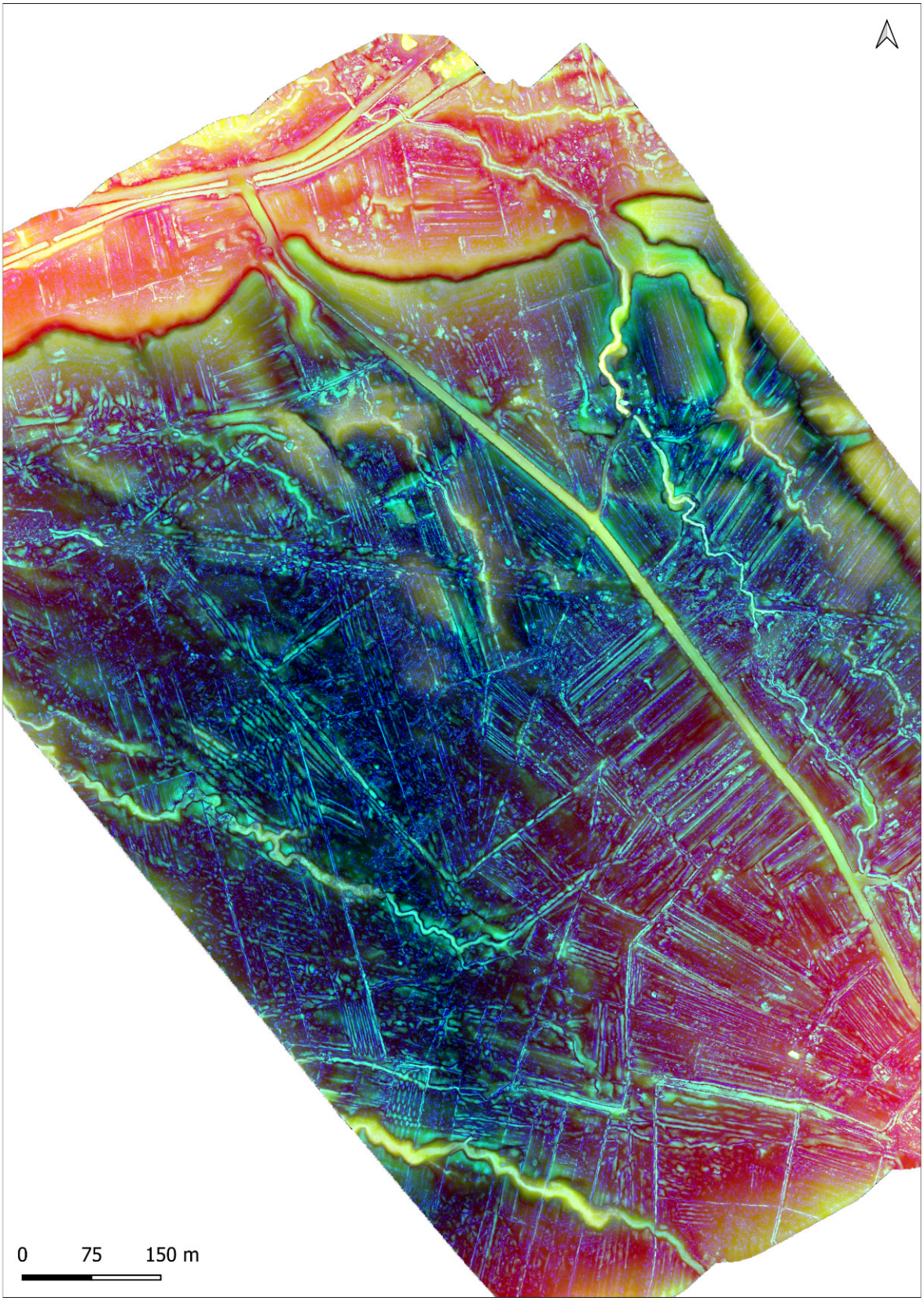


Fig. 7. Marga. Multi scale topographic position ©RVT (©Authors).

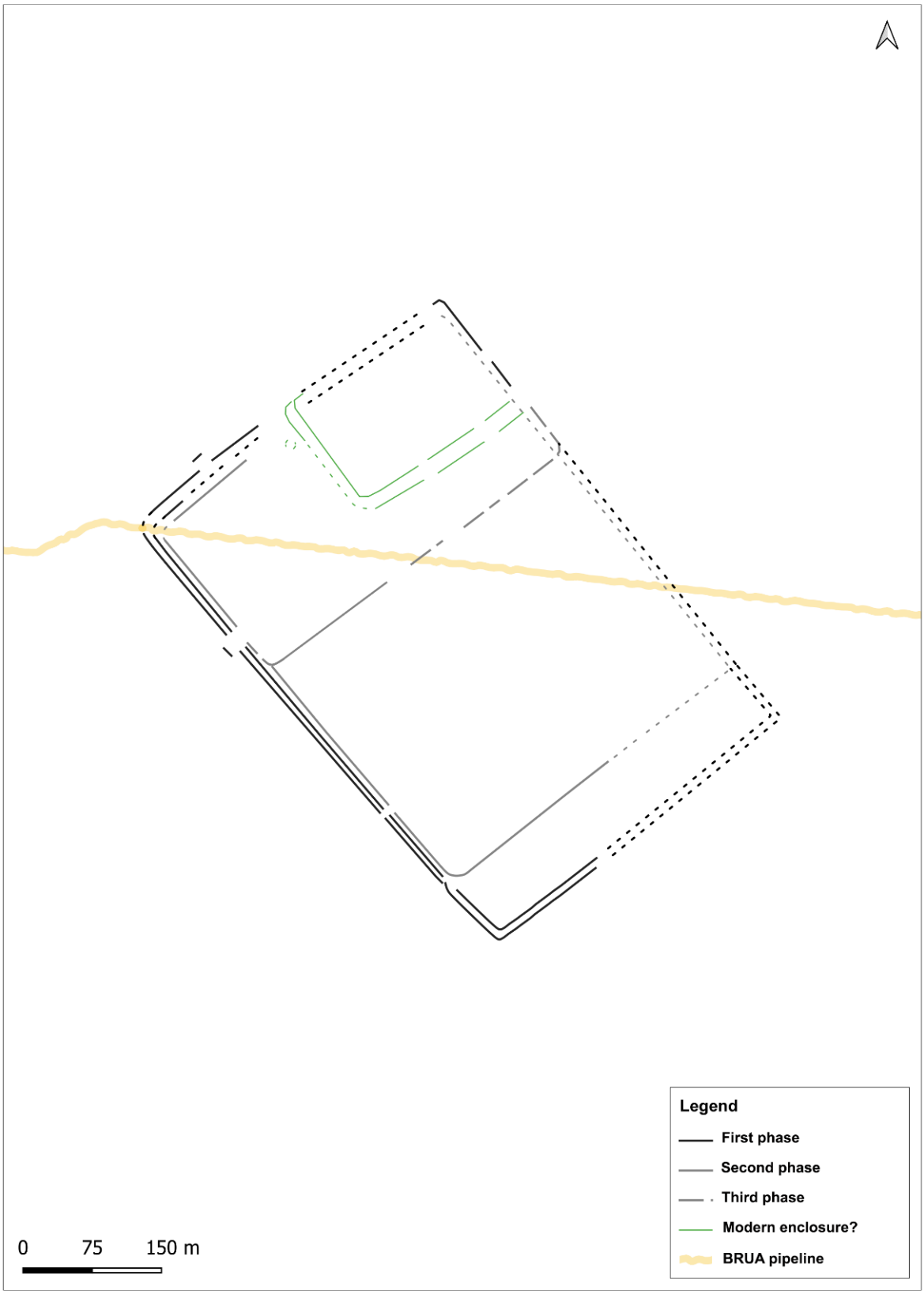


Fig. 8. Marga. Interpretation of the fortification phases and BRUA (Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Austria) pipeline (©Authors).

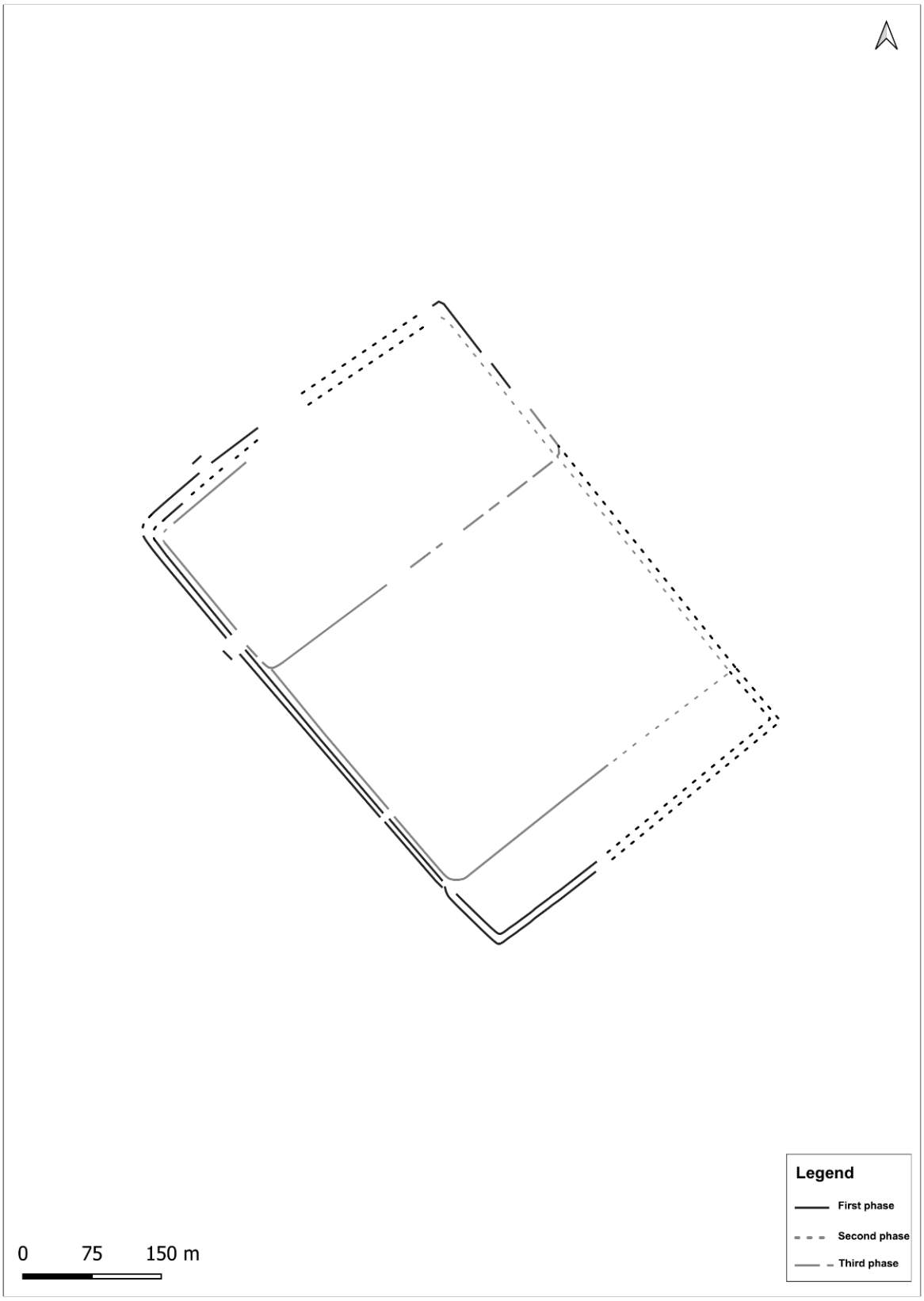


Fig. 9. Marga. Interpretation of the fortification phases (©Authors).

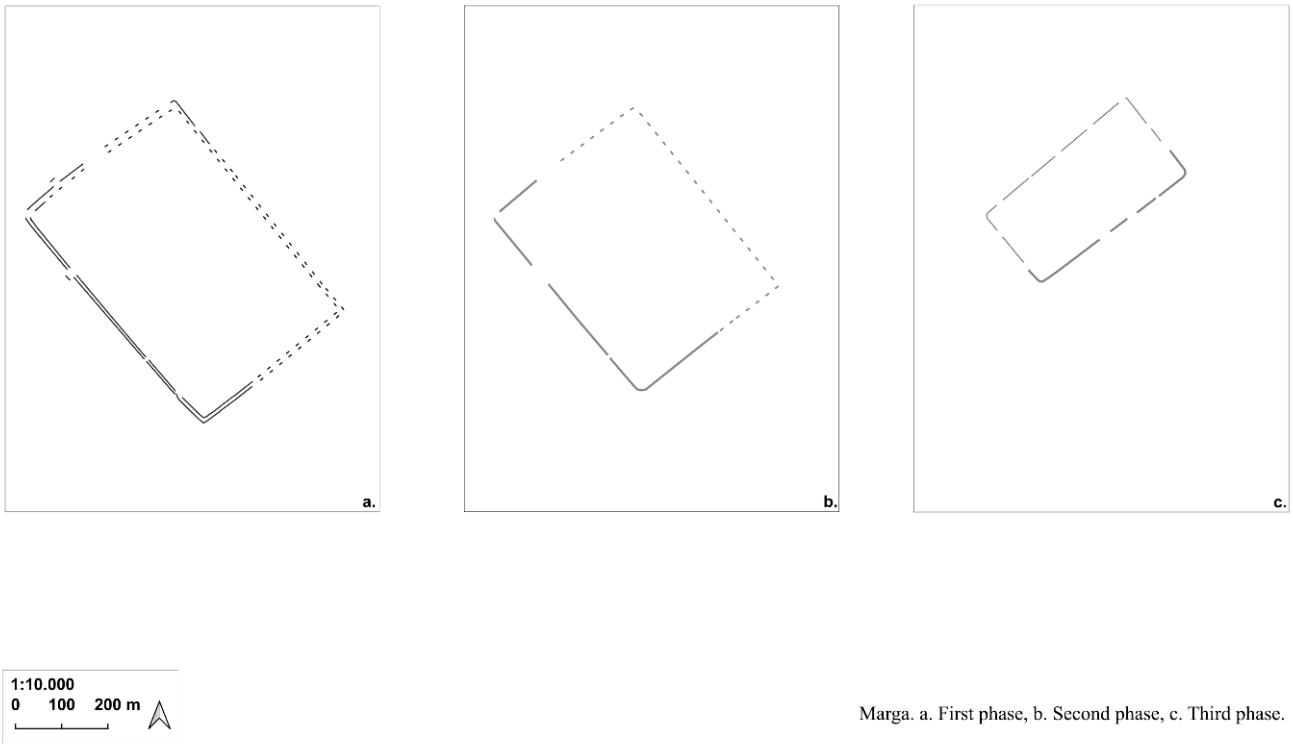


Fig. 10. Marga. Fortification phases layout (©Authors).

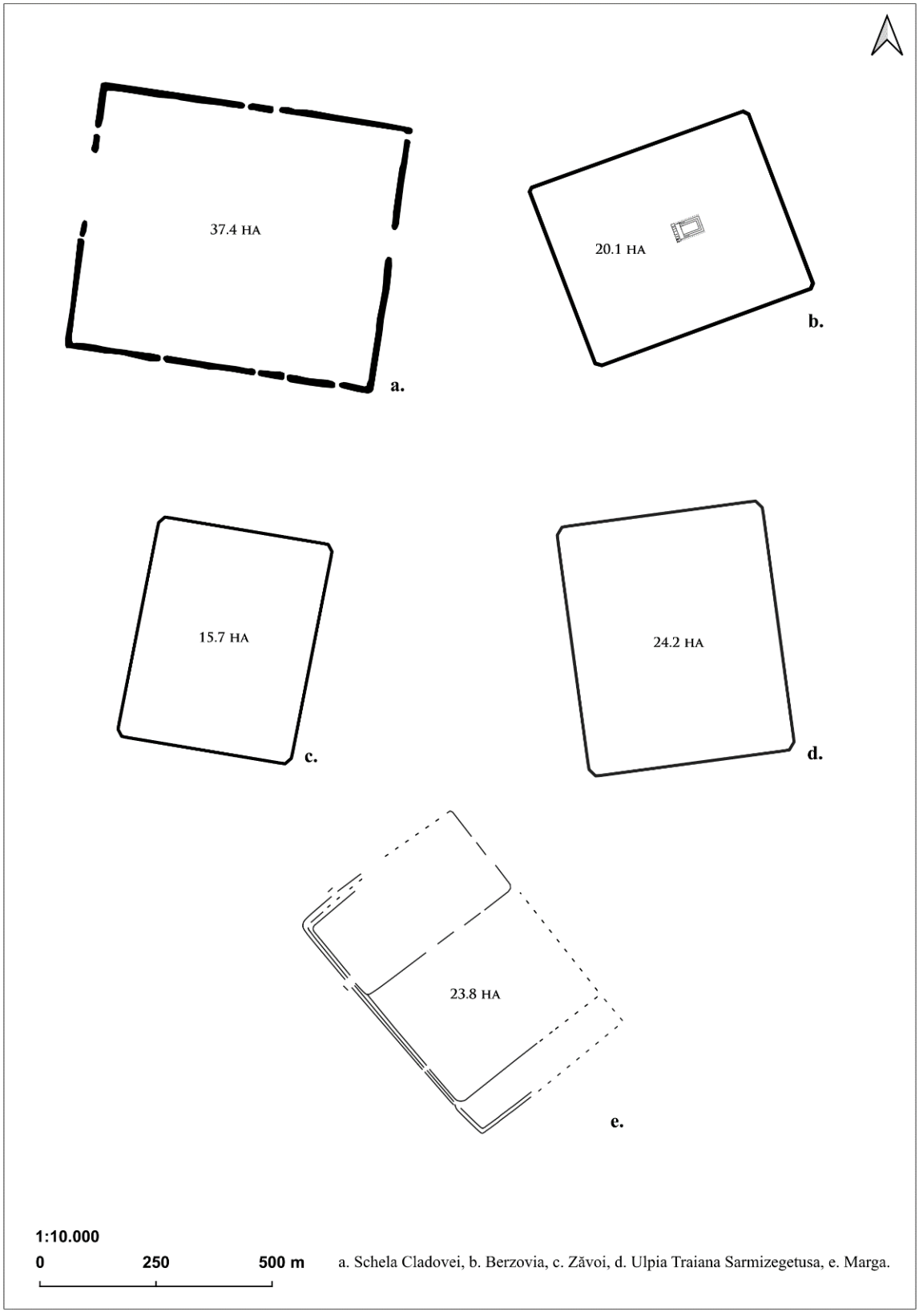


Fig. 11. Layout of the legionary fortresses in the south-western Roman province of Dacia (©Authors).

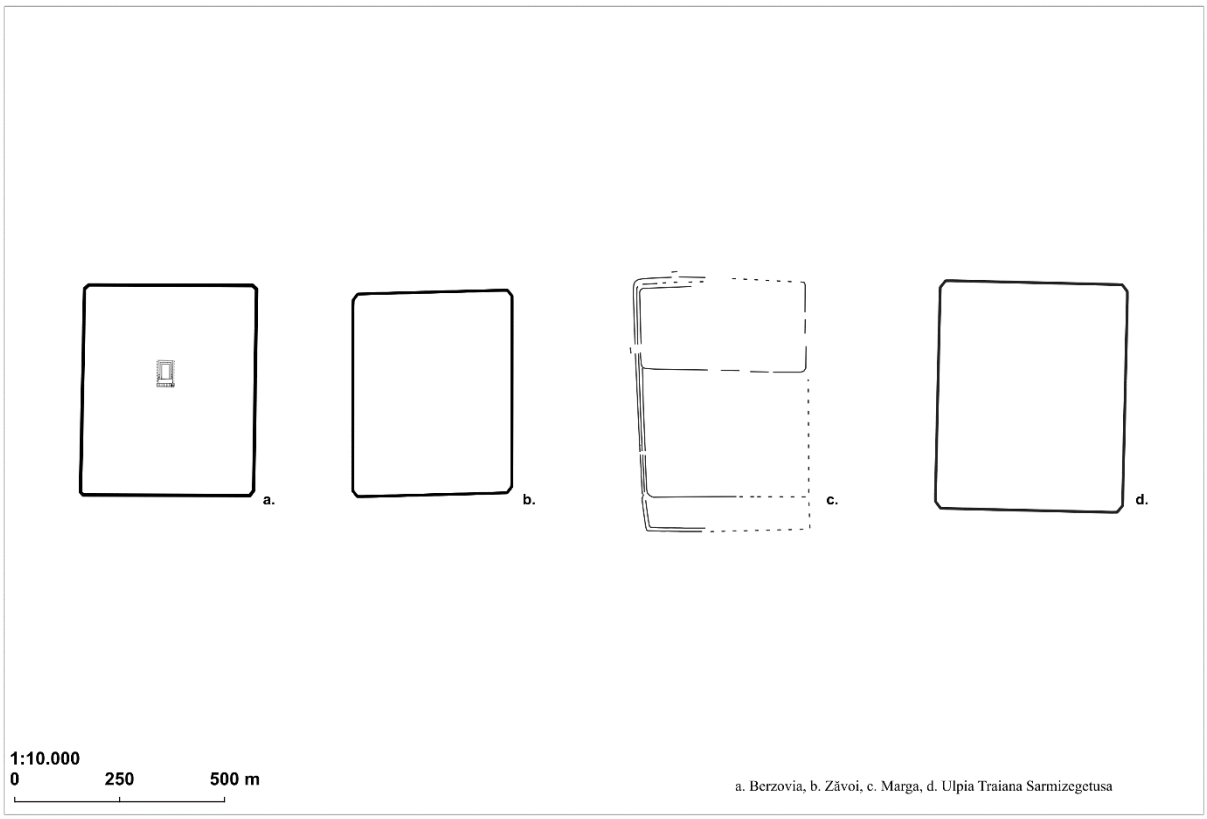


Fig. 12. Layout of the Roman legionary fortresses at Berzovia, Zăvoi, Marga and Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa – first phase (©Authors).

Fig. 13. Marga. North-West view towards the Iron Gates of Transylvania (©Miruna Libiță-Partică).

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